

Message Text

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PAGE 01 CARACA 01975 212225Z

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TAGS: PFOR, VE, CO

SUBJECT: VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA

REF: BOGOTA 1494

1. WE HAVE READ WITH INTEREST BOGOTA'S 1494 WHICH SUGGESTS THE POSSIBILITY OF THE U.S. ENTERING INTO A CLOSER BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP WITH COLOMBIA IN ORDER TO HELP MODERATE VENEZUELA'S CURRENT THRUST TOWARD LEADERSHIP IN LATIN AMERICA. WE AGREE THAT VENEZUELA'S PRESENT PRESEDENT ASPIRES TO SUCH LEADERSHIP WITH NEAR-MESSIANIC FERVOR, AND WE ARE REPORTING SEPARATELY OUR ASSESSMENT OF VENEZUELA'S CURRENT DRIVE TO EXPAND ITS INFLUENCE IN LATIN AMERICA. WE OFFER THE FOLLOWING COMMENTS AND OBSERVATIONS COVERING AMBASSADOR VAKY'S INTRIGUING SUGGESTION.

2. IT IS, OF COURSE, TRUE THAT AN INNATE RIVALRY AND JEALOUSY EXIST BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA. VENEZUELANS THINK OF THEIR NEIGHBOR TO THE WEST AND SOUTH AS A LARGER COUNTRY WHOSE DOMESTIC POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS AND, ESPECIALLY, POPULATION PRESSURES

,
CREATE DIFFICULTIES FOR VENEZUELA. THE LONG-STANDING AND STILL-UNRESOLVED BOUNDARY DISPUTE BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES REMAINS A VEXATIOUS, IF SOMEWHAT MUTED IRRITANT; WHILE SMUGGLING FROM COLOMBIA INTO VENEZUELA CONSTITUTES A MUCH TALKED ABOUT BUT
CONFIDENTIAL

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PAGE 02 CARACA 01975 212225Z

TOLERATED PROBLEM FOR THE LATTER COUNTRY. LATELY MINOR BORDER

INCIDENTS HAVE BEEN REPORTED, AND THE COLOMBIAN CONGRESS HAS RECENTLY COMPLAINED OF "UNREASONABLE" VENEZUELAN INTERFERENCE WITH COLOMBIANS CROSSING THE FRONTIER. GIVEN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES, IT IS NOT SURPRISING THAT THE VENEZUELAN MILITARY HAS TRADITIONALLY REGARDED COLOMBIA AS ITS MOST OBVIOUS NATURAL OPPONENT, WELL SITUATED TO STRIKE AT THE NEARBY MARACAIBO OIL FIELDS. GIVEN THE INEFFECTIVENESS OF THE VENEZUELAN NAVY AND THE INCAPACITY OF COLOMBIAN BRIDGES FOR VENEZUELAN TANKS, THE CHANCES OF MILITARY ENGAGEMENT ARE AT PRESENT NEGLIGIBLE.

3. DESPITE THESE LATENT ANTAGONISMS, A BROAD AND IMPORTANT COMMONALITY OF INTERESTS WOULD APPEAR TO LINK COLOMBIA WITH VENEZUELA. ON THE POLITICAL SIDE, VENEZUELA IS ACTIVELY SEEKING TO DRAW TOGETHER THE ENTIRETY OF LATIN AMERICA IN A COMMON FRONT OF SOLIDARITY AGAINST US ECONOMIC "DOMINATION." IN THIS CONNECTION, IT WILL BE RECALLED THAT COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA COLLABORATED TO ORGANIZE THE RECENT QUITO MEETING ON CUBA SANCTIONS. ON THE MILITARY SIDE THE COLOMBIAN AND VENEZUELAN ARMY CHIEFS HAVE JUST ENDED A CORDIAL MEETING IN CARACAS (AT VENEZUELA'S REQUEST) IN WHICH FRIENDSHIP, NOT RIVALRY, BETWEEN THE TWO MILITARY FORCES WAS THE THEME. ON THE ECONOMIC SIDE THE VENEZUELAN AND COLOMBIAN FINANCE MINISTERS HAVE RECENTLY MET AT CUCUTA TO DISCUSS ECONOMIC COOPERATION BETWEEN THEIR TWO COUNTRIES, WITH THE VENEZUELAN APPARENTLY SUCCEEDING IN ENLISTING SUPPORT FOR SELA. WE ALSO UNDERSTAND THAT ESTABLISHMENT OF A JOINT COMMITTEE BETWEEN THE TWO COUNTRIES WAS RECENTLY ANNOUNCED IN BOGOTA, APPARENTLY TO ALLEVIATE BORDER PROBLEMS BUT PERHAPS ALSO AS A HARBINGER OF CLOSER COOPERATION ON SUCH MATTERS AS BORDER AND ANDEAN INTEGRATION AND SHIPPING, AS WELL AS COMMON CAUSE AGAINST INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE ECONOMIC "EXPLOITATION" IN LATIN AMERICAN BY THE DEVELOPED COUNTRIES.

4. IN SHORT, WE BELIEVE THAT VENEZUELA IS MAKING DETERMINED AND CONCERTED EFFORTS TO COMPOSE ITS DIFFERENCES WITH COLOMBIA, AND THAT AMBASSADOR MELICH'S INSISTENCE ON THE NEED FOR CLOSE COORDINATION AND ALLIANCE BETWEEN VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA REFLECTS THESE EFFORTS. THE QUESTION IS, THEN, WHETHER COLOMBIA WILL YIELD TO VENEZUELAN BLANDISHMENTS IN THIS REGARD.

5. FROM THIS VANTAGE POINT WE ARE INCLINED TO THINK COLOMBIA MAY WELL DO SO, FOR THE CONSIDERATIONS WELL EXPRESSED IN PARA 4 OF

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 CARACA 01975 212225Z

BOGOTA 1494. WE SURMISE THAT COLOMBIA WOULD OPT FOR A WORKING ENTENTE CORDIALE PROFFERED BY VENEZUELA, AND THAT THE BEST WE COULD REASONABLY HOPE FOR IS TO USE COLOMBIA AS A MODERATING INFLUENCE ON VENEZUELA RATHER THAN AS A BAR TO VENEZUELA OIL-FUELED ASPIRATIONS TO LEADERSHIP.
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